

Iranian Women's Identities: Exploring Influences and Fears of the 1979 Revolution

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Women protesting during Iranian Revolution in 1979. Source:
<http://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/276114/society/family>

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was no surprise for Iranians at the time. It was a continuing effort from citizens trying to regain power from foreign entities. In 1953, an attempt to expel the Shah was almost successful through the efforts of Mohammad Mossadeq, who had successfully gotten the Shah to flee to Rome.[1] Unfortunately for Iranians, foreign ties with the Shah were incredibly strong, and the CIA alongside British intelligence helped reinstate power to the Shah, suppressing any attempt of revolution at that time.[2] However, in the 1970's the Shah's social and economic policies fueled by foreign involvements backfired and allowed a successful revolution to occur under the popular Ruhollah Khomeini.[3] At the forefront of the revolution were women, who involved themselves in many ways. Under the Shah's regime, women had had many freedoms that gave women the mindset that

they would not be in danger of having their freedoms revoked if the revolution was successful.[4] However, with the coming of the Islamic Republic, many of their freedoms were, in fact, reversed. The new reality created a huge backlash on women's lives and turned many of their worlds upside down. Recently, a significant amount of women who lived in Iran during the revolution published memoirs reflecting on how they were affected by the revolution. This study will analyze these memoirs and interviews of Iranian women's experiences during and after the Revolution, which helped to identify how education, religion, and social class led women to support the revolution as well as shaped women's identities in post-revolutionary Iran.

Historians first started writing about women in the Iranian Revolution about four years after the revolution. In 1983, Adele Ferdows wrote *Women and the Islamic Revolution*, analyzing Ali Shariati (an Iranian revolutionary and intellectual who was widely popular for his thoughts and writings at that time,) Khomeini, and popular media opinions of what the proper role of women should be in a post- revolutionary Iran. [5] In 1985, William Darrow wrote an article titled "Women's place and the place of Women in the Iranian Revolution" that utilizes ideologies from government documents, the Koran, and popular revolutionaries.[6] These historians used very similar sources from governments to revolutionaries' ideologies to identify women's place or role in society.

Ferdows says Shariati tried to convince women that their role in society should be modeled and defined after "the legacy of Fatima" who symbolizes Islam through a representation of freedom, equality, and integrity. She says that Shariati pins two points against each other: the idea of a traditional woman under the guidance of the Koran and Islam against the concept of a modern woman under the western world's exploitations of sexuality, consumerism, and materialism.[7] Her other notable figure is Khomeini, who says women deserve their freedoms to be educated, to vote, and choose a profession but all must be set in the context of Islam.[8] Ferdows concludes that these opinions leave a gap and women cannot fully find their role in society until women, other than Western upper middle class educated women, get involved in political life.[9] Darrow looks at the special section for women in the constitution that says it is crucial because women are the weakness of the country who need an extra hand in guiding them away from seduction and consumerism and keep them on a straight pathway of motherhood.[10] His analysis of Shariati is similar to Ferdows, but his discussion on Mutahhari, who was an associate of Khomeini, says that he believed women could participate in the public sphere as long as their private domain duties are completed, and they dress modestly.[11] In conclusion, he says, similarly to

Ferdows, that women's place in society continues to be under question and adds that it will continue to be that way until women themselves address the issue of their place.[12]

The next group of historians started writing about women in the revolution around the ten year anniversary of the revolution. In 1989, Minou Reeves published *Female Warriors of Allah: Women and the Islamic Revolution* that aimed to find out the background and reasons why women joined the causes of the Iranian revolution. Also in 1989, *Revolution, the State, Islam and Women: Gender Politics in Iran and Afghanistan* by Val Moghadam was published. Its purpose was to compare and contrast the role of women in those countries after their revolutions concluded. Minou Reeves concluded that women got involved because of their devotion to God and their eagerness to rid the country of western modernizations that favored imperialism and consumerism, which were in direct conflict with Islam.[13] Additionally, when women fought alongside men against a common enemy of Islam, women felt they were equal to men in the eyes of God, and that was the most important thing to them.[14] Moghadam looks at the status of women in a more legal nature and concludes that women lost status after the revolution, but the state was faced with struggles from women who refused to give up rights.[15] These historians looked at women in regards to their actions during and after the revolution, while Ferdows and Darrow looked at women through the eyes of others writings. Reeves and Moghadam were able to add to the study of women in revolutionary Iran by giving them a voice in the field. They also showed that women were capable of fighting for their role or place in society, which contrasts with what Darrow and Ferdow wrote.

In the most recent years, historians have started to look at Iranian women's writing, such as memoirs, to explain how women identified in the revolution. In 2008, Marla Harris wrote *Consuming Words: Memoirs by Iranian Jewish Women* that mostly looked at the biographies of two Iranian Jewish girls. Nima Naghibi published *Revolution, Trauma, and Nostalgia in Diasporic Iranian Women's Autobiographies* in 2009, and she examined a large sample of memoirs by Iranian women. Also, Navdeep Kahol released an article titled "Redefining Nationalism: Contemporary Memoirs by Expatriate Iranian Women." Naghibi did just that when she looked at the events women went through and how they wrote about them in autobiographies. She argues that through nostalgic memoir writings of a traumatic revolutionary Iran, women were re-imagining their identity.[16] Kahol argues that diasporic Iranian women are opening the conversation of nationalism by writing memoirs that give a new perspective of Iran to the Western world, and sensitizing what the west knows about their culture.[17] These historians changed the way others looked

at Iranian women because they were using sources written by women. They were able to show that Iranian women included themselves in the conversation. In turn, historians could take what the women were saying and identify driving forces for their actions and identities.

This paper will use memoirs, interviews, and a graphic novel to look at Iranian women. The interviews are from a book by Haleh Esfandiari, who interviewed dozens of women. In her book, she asked each woman the same questions and chronicled their answers. The graphic novel memoir is engaging in this study because Satrapi tells her story through images that allow readers sometimes to interpret what is happening. Satrapi also is providing a new perspective on how Iranian women are expressing themselves in a growing field. The other memoirs, such as *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope* or *The Journey from the Land of No*, explore the lives of a variety of women as well. These women include children, college students, grown women, Muslims, Jews, middle-class, and lower-class. Many of these women write to a western audience because they fled the country after the revolution and had become familiar with the western ideas about Iranian women. Even though Iranian women came from different social-economic, educational, and religious backgrounds, they found themselves favoring the anti-western Islamic Republic during the revolution because they desired to claim control of their country. However, while women favored expelling western political influences from Iran, they were not expecting to lose the social status they had gained. In memoirs written decades after the revolution, Iranian women, despite their different backgrounds, reflected upon common social, political, and economic fears and struggles. The memoirs also revealed that women identified as Iranian Nationalists rather than Islamic Iranian Nationalists. And because they intended to speak to a western audience, women disassociated themselves from being labeled as oppressed by exposing their will to react.

Before I dive into the analysis, I will give a brief background of what Iran looked like for women under the Shah in a pre-revolutionary country. Then a short description of Khomeini's ideas of what women's role in society should be, as well as how they conflicted with the lives they were currently living. Next, I will analyze women's education, social class, and religion to see how they influenced women in different ways to support the revolution. Did all upper/ middle-class women support the revolution? Are there different driving forces depending on the field of study? Did non-Muslims support the revolution? Then I will look at how different women experienced commonalities in fears and struggles under the Islamic Republic. Lastly, I will discuss women's identities, explore their nationalism and add to the discussion of how the western world views Iranian women.

Women Under the Shah and Khomeini

The western world highly influenced the Shah's social policies. In public, women were essentially equal to men. Reza Pahlavi, the Shah, opened up schools for girls early in his regime, and then later in his rule, he opened up attendance to college for women that carried on into Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's rule. Access to higher education allowed women to be equal to men intellectually, even if they did not directly acknowledge it.[18] This led to women working and holding important positions, which was never before done in the country. Women commonly used to work for the government, even serving as judges, and worked as high-level educators in universities sharing intellectual floors with men. This gave women a prominent presence in the public sphere. Also, in 1967 the Shah enacted the Family Protection Laws. This was important because it allowed the state and courts to be involved in formerly private matters dealt with only by family or religious laws. The two crucial topics it affected were divorce and custody of children. It now allowed women to file for divorce in the courts, and let the court file investigations against the husband to let the women divorce.[19] It also allowed women the chance to have custody of their children in the case that a woman successfully divorced their spouse.[20] When they decided to support the revolution to push out western world influences and allow an Islamic-led figure in, this was the society women lived in that had imprinted thoughts of freedom in their minds.

When Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini started to gain popularity, he was exiled in Iraq. It was from there that he published works about religion that outlined how he wanted Iranian government to look like under Islamic rule. However, because Khomeini was exiled, his published works were banned from being readily available in Iran, but his most devoted followers smuggled the writings in. He publicly supported those who were speaking out against the Shah, and those protesting against western modernization. Khomeini also stated that he wanted women to continue their equality and that their freedoms would not be in danger under an Islamic-ruled government, even though some of his writings suggested otherwise.[21] Khomeini suggested the lives of women could stay the same, but within the bounds of Islam. This allowed women to support not only the revolution, but Khomeini. When Khomeini returned to Iran in 1979, he became the Supreme Leader shortly after and instated Islamic laws into the political state.

As post-revolutionary Iran started to take shape, it began to appear undesirable to the interest of the country's women. Islamic laws forced women to wear a veil in public, it segregated women in schools, and would not allow

women to serve in important positions, including almost all government positions.[22] In fact, they encouraged women who held positions of prestige in the government to take an early retirement or face forced demotion.[23] The laws also reversed what was gained from the Family Protection Laws by putting family matters back into the hands of religion and the household.[24] Women could no longer divorce their husbands, have custody of their children, or have any authority in the home. These changes were met with resistance. Some women challenged the strict veil laws by allowing small amounts of hair to run free from the scarfs. However, Khomeini was meeting resistance with force, so that women became fearful of not having a choice but to submit to the new laws. Some women tried to be content with their new reality while maintaining some degree of dignity. This ultimately was one of the biggest struggles for women once the revolution was over and the fate of Iran was in Khomeini's hands.

Women's Influential Factors

When the revolution was in full swing, women stood at the forefront of the fight. The women's stories show that they were involved by holding protests, going to protests, organizing marches, signing petitions, and spreading the word through their communities. Their stories reflect that they did not fear the possibility of a backlash. Regardless of their background, they believed supporting the revolution was in the best interest of Iran. To understand women's post-revolutionary nationalistic identities, it is important to know the various reasons and factors that influenced women to support the revolution initially. These reasons shine a light on women's intentions for the outcome of the country, and what they truly expected to come from it. Minou Reeves says that women found a common enemy in western values which drove them to support the revolution.[25]

Iran was not solely a Muslim nation. There was a large Jewish community in Iran at the time of the revolution. Since the revolution was religiously led, that would imply that the Jewish community did not support it. However, Roya Hakakian tells a different story. Roya was a young Jewish girl at the time of the revolution. She came from a lower middle-class family because her family spent much of their money sending her brothers to America for protection against the Shah's secret police.[26] Her brothers were critics of the Shah's regime, and after they had left, Roya spent many hours devoting herself to understanding the critiques.[27] She was heavily influenced by her brothers and their opinions on the government. Also, because she could no longer attend the paid part of schooling, she spent more time with her Muslim friend and her family. She was influenced by them as well. Roya may have been a

young girl, but she was old enough to understand the revolution and let others sway her opinion. The fact that she was Jewish did not seem to play a huge factor in the fact that she sympathized with the revolution. Although she did not find herself shouting “Allah” as so many revolutionary supporters did, she found herself relishing in the fact that she wanted to and celebrated in the togetherness of the situation.[28] Roya may have been Jewish, but that did not affect her actions. Instead, she was influenced by the education of those closest to her, her brothers and her friends.

Education played a significant role in women’s life. Shirin Ebadi was an upper middle-class Iranian woman serving as a judge at the start of the revolution. She was fully educated in the law at the time, which she thought would protect her.[29] That is why Shirin did not support the revolution until she felt the Shah was overstepping his boundaries and breaking the law.[30] She states that she “would rather be a free Iranian than an enslaved attorney.”[31] Unlike Roya, Shirin was fueled by the knowledge she obtained from her formal college education. Shirin followed a logical train of thought that related to her field of study to decide whether she wanted to support the revolution. While Roya was a young Jewish girl with many social restrictions on her actions, Shirin was a fully educated adult with full control of her actions. The two different variants of education push them toward favoring the efforts of the revolution.

Similar to Roya, Marjane Satrapi let influences from her parents drive her on her journey to supporting the revolution. Marjane was also a young girl at the time. Her parents were heavily involved in the events and critiques of the Shah’s regime, which initially sparked Marjane’s interest. However, she took it upon herself to get educated on the subject. Marjane drowned herself in books, where she learned about the poor and started to realize not everyone was as privileged as her family.[32] Also comparable to Roya, Marjane let education other than schooling help guide her to a decision. Marjane, however, considered herself a Muslim and did not face the pressure of staying faithful to another religion, while also desiring to remain connected to her country. Marjane was further pushed toward supporting the revolution when she learned about the role of social class in a person’s life. Marjane learned about the realities of social class through an incident with her maid. Her maid had started to like the neighbor boy, and Marjane was helping the two communicate.[33] When her father stepped in and stopped the interactions because of class, Marjane decided she wanted to support the revolution because she thought that way of thinking was wrong.[34]

Her maid, Mehri, came from a low-income family that lived in the rural provinces of Iran. These poor town women lived their life differently because they were not allowed to go off to college or have some of the freedoms many women had in the city.[35] Their main concerns were their husbands, children, and neighborhood networking that would benefit their household. This reconstructs the reasons why women in poor provinces supported the revolution. They were not concerned with the law, nor did they have the education to further their thinking on other reasons. [36] Most of these women supported the revolution because their husbands were involved in the violence and they desired to protect their family values.[37]

Women's Fears and Struggles

After Khomeini had come into power, women realized they were living in a different Iran than they had expected. Their memoirs often depict a sudden shift in attitude towards the outcomes of the revolution. As women's lives were being transformed almost overnight, they started to realize they were about to face problems from the very people they supported and brought to power. They were now living in a country that thought they needed regulating because they were weak and susceptible to the evils of western materialism and corruption.[38] Although women joined in alliance with the revolution for different reasons, they shared troubles in the aftermath of the revolution. Many women thought the post- revolutionary government would respect their individual rights because they had helped bring such a government to power with their interests at heart. [39] This shows a parallel in the diversity of women who supported the revolution and illustrates the side of women that did not agree with the Islamic Republic.

Marjane Satrapi was entering her teenage years after the revolution, and Farideh Goldin was entering her adult years. Farideh was from southern Iran, where the thinking was not as progressive as northern Tehran. From her memoir, it's hard to say if she was a supporter of the revolution, but she was a woman who supported Western social values. She often discussed how she found it appalling that women had to be part of arranged marriages at a young age and that she tried her hardest to avoid the same future for herself by putting it off with education.[40] Regardless of these two girls' differences, they shared characteristics in the fact that they were scared for themselves for being too modern. Farideh tells of one time she was driving down a crowded street next to a movie theater when it let out, and all these men came out. It was considered too western or modern for women to drive, or if they did drive, they were often mocked for not doing so properly. It was at this point the men surrounded Farideh's vehicle and started to harass her. They banged on her

windows, yelled at her, called her names and acted provocatively as they tried to scare and humiliate her.[41] She recalled “shaking in fear” just as Marjane remembered her fear by illustrating herself with shaky emotions and terrified faces.[42]

Marjane’s fear of getting in trouble for being too modern stemmed from her interests in western music and clothing styles, as well as her rejection of wearing a “proper veil.” She even participated in a protest against making women wear the veil; however, the rally ended with men physically hurting women for being ‘western whores’ and chanting at them “the scarf or a beating” as they chased and beat women at the protest.[43] She also experienced a run in with the Guardians of the Revolution, who were responsible for catching those not following the Islamic laws and punishing them correctly.[44] In her run in with the Guardians, she was wearing a modern veil, but she was also dressed in a jean jacket, jeans, Nike sneakers, and a Michael Jackson pin. Marjane’s fear of punishment from this institution forced her to lie to get out of the situation. She cries to the guardians, but in the next frames after that she depicts herself looking terrified by the experience.[45] In one of Halah’s interviews, a woman by the name of Shokouh tells a similar story. She says she was stopped by the Guardians of the Revolution as well, and they shamed her for the earrings she was wearing.[46] Luckily, just as Marjane had gotten away, so did Shokouh. She used the tactic of intimidation as opposed to sympathy Marjane had used.[47] This shows how even though Marjane supported the revolution, she still valued western culture and social status. This was a parallel for teenagers like herself and older women, such as Shirin and Shokouh.

Days after Khomeini had come back to Iran, Shirin’s work environment started to be turned around as they appointed new representatives who aligned with the interests of Islam. Shirin felt encouraged by her actions in supporting the revolution and being notable in her position as a judge.[48] When one new representative scolded her in front of everyone for not wearing a veil, she was appalled, and it served as the start to all her other fears. Shirin’s biggest concern seemed to be not having control over her life choices in a marriage. She hated the idea that she was subjected to the opinions and oppression of her husband under the law, and this turned into Shirin acting out against her husband.[49] The fear transformed into negative actions because she knew that even if her husband disagreed with the laws, it did not matter. As a result, Shirin ended up going to a notary with her husband to get a postnuptial agreement that said that she could divorce her husband if she so pleased, as well as get custody of their future children.[50] Not all women were able to settle some of their nuptial fears.

Amineh, one of the women interviewed by Halah, whose husband died shortly after the revolution, continued to deal with problems in settling his will nearly twenty years after the fact.[51] These women did not support the revolution to be subjected this kind of reality. They all had their individual reasons, but the results of the revolution brought women together in their struggles and grief.

Women also shared in an intellectual and economic fear that intertwined with each other. Many women were forced out of their jobs or demoted, such as Shirin who was demoted from her job as a judge.[52] Others were going to be mandatorily removed from their jobs but were forced to train their replacements.[53] Masoumeh was compelled to take a demotion in her career just as Shirin and Farideh were. Farideh also explains how women were no longer expected to interact with each other in the workplace intellectually. She tells of a time at her job when the men were segregated from the women, and she was shocked how the women did not act professionally or intellectually in the positions they were serving.[54] The thought of women being pushed to this mental capacity frightened her. Women like Masoumeh differed from women such as Shirin only in terms of social class. They belonged to different social standings, which was an important aspect of Iranian society before the revolution. However, it does not matter when understanding that women of all social classes went through similar fears. These recollections from different women prove that.

Iranian Nationalism and Speaking to the West

Women wrote their memoirs or participated in interviews decades after the revolution when they could speak on their thoughts more precisely. For numerous reasons, some of them left the country and wrote from their new home country, while others stayed or returned to Iran. The majority of these women wrote in English and were writing or speaking to a western audience. They were sharing their culture and country with the West, which generalizes Iran to be a backward country with gendered oppression. In Kahol's analysis of Iranian memoir writers, she says that these women are attempting to dissociate their sense of nationalism with that of western views of Islamic patriarchy, theocracy, totalitarianism, and more.[55] Because of how women portrayed their struggle with the Republic, they ended up separating themselves from the Islamic Republic. For example, the Islamic Republic did not allow women to hold public office and pushed women out who were holding an office. Actions such as these alienated half the population of Iran and pushed women even farther from accepting their given role under the new laws. However, they were still deeply connected to their homeland, their culture, their family and their traditions. This bound them to their Nation and

often served as the purpose why many women turned to reflect on their childhood many years after they left Iran and even more years after the revolution.

As mentioned before, many of the writers wrote their memoirs from different countries and for different personal reasons. Roya Hakakian found herself writing a memoir because she was a journalist in America, where she was receiving pressures from fellow writers to hear her story.[56] She also expressed the need to share her untold story because she had been hiding it too long, and she yearned to share a story about a country that denied her belonging.[57] Roya was ultimately rejected by the country of her birth because she was not a practicing Muslim. This fact hurt her and kept her from sharing her story for many years. Although she no longer could be part of Iran physically, she reflects on her love for the country in her memoir. She goes through the significance of her childhood neighborhood and the people she surrounded herself with there. She recalls the emotions that flowed through her young body when she witnessed the revolution unfolding around her, and acknowledges her eagerness to be a part of it. She sympathized with the revolution and hoped by expelling western political influences her family and neighbors could live a better life. She never expected the revolution to force her to leave the country in fear. Instead, she expected the revolution to strengthen her homeland, and she expresses hatred for what the Islamic Republic turned Iran into. It is through her current hatred of the Iran and her reflections of her beloved home that western readers can see Roya's strong connection to Iran and how she identified as a Nationalist. However, some women identified as Nationalist differently.

Shirin Ebadi wrote her memoirs from Iran, where she continued to live despite the hardships after the revolution was successful. She was serving as a lawyer defending victims and their families in a case about a series of murders, when she came across files that contained the names of the victims that were killed and the names of those who would be killed and saw her name on the list.[58] The fact that Shirin had evaded death seemed to be the driving force that got Shirin to write the memoir. Throughout her memoir, she explores her conflicting attitudes and opinions of the Islamic Republic. She faced problems in her marriage, public life, and work life but still stayed in Iran. To her, Iranian Nationalism meant that women had to fight for their future in the country even if the Islamic Republic was in direct opposition to their personal identities. For Shirin, this meant sharing her ideas that Islam and Iranian women could coexist with democracy and equality in a peaceful manner.[59] She appealed to western audiences by showing that Iranian

women were fighters, stubborn, and not submissive to or accepting of their fate under the new government.

As for Marjane, she eventually left Iran for France, which is where she wrote her graphic novel. The book explores her experiences in Iran during the revolution, in Austria after the revolution, and then her return from Austria. Although she ultimately left Iran because of the social pressures brought on by the Islamic Republic, she exhibits strong nationalistic ties to the country.[60] In one part of her book, she had gotten back to Iran not long before, and she is talking about her future with her soon to be husband. He mentions to her that they should move to the United States or somewhere more progressive, but she disagrees and does not want to leave Iran.[61] Even though Marjane was living a life that was forbidden by the Republic, she continued to put herself in danger to stay in Iran. For Marjane, her social values aligned with those of Western social values, but her identity was rooted in the country she grew up in, watching her parents fight for justice. Marjane presented herself as relatable to western readers but clarified how her identity was strongly connected to her country by showing multiple instances of her fighting for her role in Iranian society. As Naghibi argues, nostalgia in women's writings brought forward emotions they did not realize were there prior.[62] Marjane does exactly this through reflections of her childhood, which slowly mold into her sense of Iranian Nationalism.

Conclusion

Khomeini was said to have stated that “women who contributed to the Revolution were, and are, women in Islamic dress, not elegant women all made up, who go around all uncovered, dragging behind them a trail of men. The coquettes who put on makeup and go into the streets showing off their necks, their hair, their shapes, did not fight against the Shah. They never did anything good, not those; they do not know how to be useful, neither socially, nor politically, nor professionally.”[63] Khomeini was leading a revolution against the West and all that it stood for, but women were not necessarily completely against the West. Instead, they fought for a new emerging set of values that were starting to form through exposure to certain freedoms, but that had roots in their faith and nationality. Besides, the women who fought against the Shah were a variety of women. They were young, old, Jewish, non-practicing Muslim, college educated, self-educated and unveiled women who found the Shah's regime to no longer fit the interests of the Iranian people. They were women who in turn for supporting the cause were then subjected to a new reality that the Islamic Republic presented them with. Despite the hardships thrown at them, they worked to adjust their lifestyle and fight for

equality. Because even though they did not identify with the religious and political values and laws of post-revolutionary Iran, they had a vision of Iran that brought inclusivity to women under Islamic law. Through their reflective writings and interviews, women revealed their opposition to the Islamic Republic to their western audiences. With the intent of separating their identities from that of the helpless oppressed, Iranian women highlighted their strengths within themselves. By doing so, they were able to separate their identities about religious law and fortify a bond to the Nation.

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[1] Robin Wright, *The Last Great Revolution: Turmoil and Transformation in Iran* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 11.

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